

CHAPTER XVI WARFARE AND WEAPONS

PRIVATE FORAYS

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701 Two or three generations have elapsed since the Karen in Lower Burma indulged in their old-time warfare, which consisted of forays secretly organized and carefully executed against their enemies. In the Toungoo Hills and in Karenni these raids have been suppressed only in recent years, as the regions named have been brought more fully under British rule. The people used to call such expeditions "ta hseh hsu ma beu," which means a strong and concealed thrust. A foray was undertaken by an individual to avenge a personal wrong committed by an inhabitant of another village. It was a recognized method of settling a grievance, like the sheriff's execution of the judgment obtained in a suit at law in a more civilized community. The conflict was not one between village and village, but between personal enemies. The man who inaugurated the foray set up his spear in the open space of his village and marked a white line half-way up on the spear shaft. Those who were ready to go on the expedition and renounce the right of their families to an indemnity in case they were killed, placed their marks above the half-way line, while those willing to join without making this renunciation added their marks below it. Of course, the chicken bones had to be consulted both as to the feasibility of the raid and a favorable time for it.

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789 When this time had arrived, the organizer of the foray killed a hog or a fowl; took a bit of the heart, liver, and entrails; minced them together; added a little salt, and wrapped the mixture in a leaf. This talisman was then entrusted to two spies, who were to carry it to the village where the foe dwelt. They were admonished to note whether or not any spikes were planted along the paths leading to the place, the best means of access thereto, and the precise location and general arrangement of the village. Finally, they were to visit with the inhabitants there and find an opportunity of dropping the contents of their leaf into the food of their hosts. If they succeeded in this last stratagem, they were supposed to

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have swathed the heads of their foes. That is, their hosts by par-
taking of the talisman would become so confused as to fail to seize
their weapons when needed for defense and would be overwhelmed
by the enemy. Unlike the spies of Israel these Karen spies, on their
return, usually gave a favorable report and displayed great eager-
ness for the combat.

The instigator of the foray now sent out for his men, who came
not only from his own village, but also from neighboring ones where
he had friends and blood-brothers. He might gather in as many as
two hundred warriors. These he feasted, but before passing around
the liquor he poured some on the ground as a kind of libation, while
praying:

"Lord of the seven heavens and the seven earths. Lord of the
rivers and streams, the mountains and hills. We give thee liquor to
drink and rice to eat. Help us, we entreat thee. We will go forth
now and attack yon village. We have swathed the heads of the
inhabitants. Assist us. Render their minds oblivious and cause
them to forget themselves, that they may sleep heavily and their
slumber may be unbroken. Let not a dog bark at us, nor a hog grunt
at us. Grant that the villagers may not seize a bow, sword, or spear.
May the Lord help my children and grandchildren who go to attack
yon village, and may he deliver them from all harm. May they sub-
due their enemies and not be lost. May they be delivered from the
bow, the sword, and the spear."

After this prayer the elders drank in turn of the liquor, and it
was then circulated freely among the assembled warriors. The in-
stigator of the foray now killed a fowl, preparatory to inspecting its
bones for a favorable omen as to the success of the undertaking,
but before the inspection he offered up the following petition:

"Fowl, possessor of superhuman powers, fore-endowed with
divine intelligence, thou scratchest with thy feet and peckest with
thy bill. Thou goest to Hku Te (the king of death). Thou goest
to The Na (monarch of death). Thou goest to Shi U, the brother
of God. Thou goest into the presence of God. Thou seest unto the
verge of heaven and unto the edge of the horizon. I now purpose
to go and attack yon village. Shall we be hit? Shall we be ob-
structed? If we go, shall we suffer? Shall we die by the bow?
Shall we be pierced by the spear? Shall we grow weary or exhaust
ourselves? If so, reveal thyself unfavorably."¹

¹ This prayer, in which superhuman powers are attributed to the fowl, is similar to
prayers of the Kanyas of Burma, who ascribe like powers to the pig.

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 787 other fowl was slain, and a third, if necessary. On obtaining a favorable omen, the organizer of the raid harangued his men, telling them that they would surely prove victorious, that he would indemnify the families of any who might be killed, and that he would replace all weapons that might be lost or broken. He assured them that he expected all to return, and declared that no disaster could befall them. Thereupon he called for two volunteers to lead in ascending the ladder to the village-house and making the attack on the arrival of the war-band at its destination. Addressing the volunteer leaders, he promised them drums and buffaloes as rewards for the deeds of valor they were soon to perform. They were to be the hunting dogs, the wild boars, full of cunning and courage. If they should be slain, their families would receive the rewards. If, however, they failed, the disaster of the expedition would be their fault.

726 At length, the war-band set forth, chanting verses, as follows:

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"I go to war. I am sent.
 I go to fight. I am sent.
 Clothe me with an iron breastplate.
 Give to me the iron shield.
 I am not strong. May I take on strength.
 I am weak. May I attain vigor."

"I go with a host of men.
 We will reach the steps of the house
 And fire muskets and shout aloud.
 The men will come with wives and children.
 Raise the spear and draw the sword.
 Smite the neck and pierce the side.
 The blood is gushing purple."

"The great hawk flies above the house.
 It pounces on the chief's red cock.
 It grasps its prey near the lowest step.
 It seizes then the chief's white cock,
 And the great hawk flies away,
 Leaving the chief behind in tears."

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Whatever one may think of the poetic quality of these three stanzas, they depict vividly the successive stages in their adventure, as the chanting braves conceived it. In the first stanza they

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726 don their armor and muster up their wavering courage. In the second they go into action with their lust for blood fully aroused. In the third they compare themselves to the great hawk carrying off its prey before the eyes of the chief, whose village they have invaded. The mission of the war-band was to accomplish some such program as this.

The warriors so timed their march as to reach the vicinity of the foe's village after dark, distributed their force around the unsuspecting inhabitants before dawn, and sallied forth with a great shout as soon as it was light. The charge against the village-house was led by the two volunteers, and all the inmates who jumped to the ground were cut down or pierced with spears by the armed men in waiting. No quarter was shown, even the women and children being either slain or taken captive, according to the orders of the instigator of the raid. Their main object was evidently plunder, for they lopped off the heads, hands, and feet of their victims, in order to obtain the necklaces, bracelets, and anklets more easily. They also slew the small children, perhaps because they would otherwise be doomed to a lingering death.

From an old man I learned of one of these forays, in which his father had participated while still a young man. The father professed to have had but little interest in the expedition, being forced to join it by circumstances. Lagging behind the other members of the attacking party, he saw two girls who had escaped from the house and hidden in the forest. When they saw him they started to run, thus disclosing themselves to others who gave chase, struck them down with their swords, cut off their hands to get their bracelets, and left them to die. A man and his wife and baby were also in a fair way to escape, but were hard pressed by pursuers, whereupon the husband compelled his wife to throw away the infant, who impeded her progress; and as they rounded the crest of a hill they looked back only to see their child being cut to pieces.

If the villagers made too stout a resistance to the first onset, the raiders set fire to the inflammable bamboo structure, thereby bringing the conflict to a quick conclusion, though at the same time reducing the amount of available loot. They frequently mutilated the bodies of their victims, carrying off their jaw-bones as trophies of their ghastly work. It is not clear from any extant records that the Karen were once head-hunters, but this may have been the case. In token of the utter destruction of a village, vegetable seeds were sometimes planted on its desolate site.

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plements were spears and javelins. These were usually made with iron heads either of small bayonet-shape or elongated ellipse-shape sharpened to a point. In the case of the larger spears the head measures about two feet in length and two or three inches across at the widest part of the blade. The shaft of some hard wood is five or six feet long.

The *Karen Thesaurus* distinguishes among three kinds of swords or "na," as they are collectively called by the people themselves. One kind is the two-edged sword with a sharp point ("na hweh hko"); the second is a blunt sword shaped like the tail of an eel ("na nya hti meh"), and the third is square at the end and can be used for cutting only ("na xu hko").³ These swords were carried in sheathes of a type similar to those seen among the Shan, formed of two pieces of bamboo held together by rattan bands woven around them. No one knows whether or not these weapons are native with the Karen. They may have been copied from the Shan. Besides the three kinds of swords, the Karen used a long knife ("dah") for both defensive and offensive purposes, which is devoted nowadays to domestic employment.⁴

During the sixteenth century the Portuguese carried on an extensive trade in firearms in the East, especially in Burma. In this way the Karen tribes became familiar with flint-lock and match-lock guns, owning numbers of them. In numerous instances the stock of the gun had no butt to be held against the shoulder, as in the case of European and American guns, but a handle that was held against the cheek. Powder was "pounded out" in a mortar containing sulphur, saltpeter, and charcoal, all native products. The sulphur was often obtained from the deposits of bat dung found in the limestone caves that are numerous in the Moulmein district. Indeed, one of the common names for gun-powder was "bla-e," meaning bat dung. Inasmuch as lead mines have long been known in Burma and on the Chinese border, I presume that the Karen got the material for their bullets from these. When lead was not to be had, they substituted small round stones.

The approaches to the villages were guarded by burying sharpened bamboo spikes, hardened with fire, in the paths, leaving only the point protruding at a sufficient angle to catch the foot of the passer-by. These almost hidden spikes inflicted terrible wounds in

³ For the weapons used in hunting see pp. 164, ff.

⁴ *Karen Thesaurus*, Vol. III, 154; Cross, *Karen-English Dictionary*, 397.

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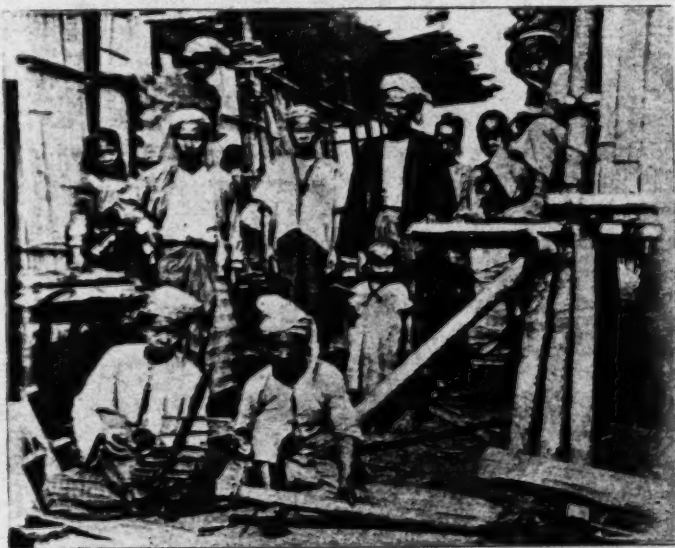
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the bare feet of the enemy who was careless enough to run into them.

In the early times the participants in a foray equipped themselves with armor and shields, although such protective contrivances are almost unknown at the present time. The armor was a sort of jacket of thick hides thought to be serviceable in warding off the strokes and thrusts of sword and spear. The name by which it was known was "t' xo." Shields, called "k' taw," were constructed of wood and covered with a tough skin. I have not been able to learn from any one what was their shape or just how they were made. However, Mr. F. H. Gates, the political officer of Karenni, gives us this bit of information on the subject: "A generation or two back these people carried a shield made of plank covered with buffalo hide and studded with brass nails." He adds that no specimens of these shields are to be obtained now.⁵

⁵ Report of 1894-95, p. 22.

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A SEAW KAREN ORCHESTRA, THARRAWADDY HILLS
The harp and the guitar are being played together.